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ABSTRACT

The successful women's sports publicist communicates the legitimacy of women's intercollegiate athletics to the media and to the public. Because the field of women's sports has not had the amount of media exposure compared to that of professional sports, collegiate men's revenue sports, and high school sports, the women's sports publicist must rely on the usual and the unusual methods of advancing and reporting women's sports events. The news release containing "hard" news items (as opposed to feature articles) is the main communicative tool for the publicist. However, the feature story with an interesting angle is the best assurance of highlighted program coverage. Coaches and athletes can support the women's sports program by participating in radio discussions, writing columns for local papers, and by being accessible to the media at sports events. Although many women's sports programs lack the funds for advertising, increased spectator interest can create greater sports coverage, making public service announcements, radio giveaways, community calendars, and other low-cost publicity efforts necessary. (FG)

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NCAA Public Relations Manual: PROMOTING WOMEN'S INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORTS

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Promoting and reporting women's intercollegiate sports is a different game for directors of sports information than publicizing football or other revenue sports. Although comparisons can be drawn between women's sports and men's non-revenue sports--lower attendance figures, minimal media attention--several other factors necessitate a different approach be used in publicizing women's collegiate sports.

Recognizing the priorities of the media in its coverage of women's collegiate sports helps explain one reason a different approach is necessary in publicizing women's athletics. Because the media consider the interest and mandate of the public in their circulation or broadcast area, women's intercollegiate sports often find themselves down the list of media coverage priorities behind professional sports, collegiate men's revenue sports, and boys and girls high school sports. In order to move up that scale of priorities, a women's sports program must build a following. Substantial spectator interest should be reflected in increased media attention.

In addition, members of the media are generally not aware of the scope of women's competition or the importance of a particular game or tournament. Because the strength of women's teams does not always align with the success levels of men's sports at the same institution, extra pains must be taken in explaining the significance of women's athletic events, and the qualifying routes to championships. The media must also be awakened to the improvement in skill from high school to college level sports, since many media representatives are unfamiliar with the college rules or standards of excellence.

How to Approach Women's Sports Publicity

In order to maximize your efforts as a women's sports publicist, you must rely on the usual and the unusual methods of advancing and reporting women's sports events.

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News releases and sports results should be reported as hard news items. The release should be of exceptional quality and include quick reference information as well as stories. It is also helpful to list background information such as a roster or hometown information in each release for those media representatives who sporadically read your release.

Since most women's sports news offices, unless combined with a men's department, are not on a regular beat system for reporters, the news release is the main communicative tool for the women's sports publicist. A regular, quality advance will definitely aid in building and maintaining credibility with the media. It is easier for a sports reporter to put together a story taken from the publicity department advance and telecopied story-form game results than to put together bits and snatches of telephoned information.

However, as much as the women's sports publicist would like to consider women's sports news as hard news, the bulk of women's sports coverage still involves the feature angle. The advance and game results may be worth a few paragraphs or a few seconds of air time, but the feature is your best assurance of highlighted program coverage.

For best feature ideas maintain close ties with your coaches, attend practices, keep a background card on each athlete, and keep track of hometown athletes who may show up on your opponents' teams as well as your own teams. You should be able to find the unusual angle which would lend itself to a feature. Here's one example: the Wisconsin women's track coach drags runners attached by surgical tubing behind his motorcycle in order to increase the runners sprint speed. This proved to be an out-of-the-ordinary feature for the print and visual media, and an opportunity to plug our next track event.

The coaches of your program can also be an invaluable aid to the sports publicist in gaining recognition for the women's sports program. By running a speakers bureau and informing groups of its availability, the women's sports publicist has a vehicle for the program to go one-on-one with the community and

the state. Schedule the coaches on half-time shows of broadcasted men's sports events, have them participate in community sports activities dressed in the school's identifiable attire, offer them as experts in their sports to write columns or make comments on current research or sports happenings. Train your coaches on what is newsworthy, how to be quoted, to be accessible, and to show the initiative when media are present at sports events.

Identify yourself as a women's sports publicist who is knowledgeable and well-read on current political and scientific women's sports happenings. Consider yourself the media's link to awareness of national issues which affect your women's sports program. With more and more research available on women in sport, and with news of changing sports legislation and politics breaking frequently, the media need a knowledgeable expert they can call upon to relate the latest in women's sports issues. By being well-read on the national scene, it may also lend you interesting features that you can relate to your program and to your local media.

Increasing Spectator Interest the Key to More Coverage

I can't emphasize enough the relationship between increased spectator interest and greater sports coverage. The media don't operate on a consciousness-raising level, and are not ruled by Title IX. Sports editors and directors need to see the demand for coverage before they will provide the ink and air.

Use a marketing plan which considers specific audiences to increase spectator interest at your school. Expect the media to advance your women's sports events, but don't rely entirely upon them. You may want to consider advertising, both print and broadcast. If your budget forbids advertising expenses, try to secure sponsors for the ads. Use public service announcements, radio giveaways, community calendars, posters, mailings to specific audiences whose memberships may endorse women's sports, correspondence with high school coaches and athletic directors.

Persistence, consistency, accuracy and exposure are the keys in promoting a new product. Educate your editors and sports directors. Provide them with all the

essentials of who, what, where, when and why information, and create an angle for them. Make certain they are aware of the national women's sports polls available, and request they run them regularly. Notice if a photographer or reporter has a special interest in a women's sport, and add them to your mailing and phone list. Many times these people assign themselves to stories, or suggest coverage to an editor.

It Is a Thorny Path We Tread

Some of the difficulties encountered as a women's sports publicist occur because of logistics. In many cases the women's sports news office is isolated from the men's office, which may limit your contact with the media. Don't be afraid to use the telephone frequently, or visit the studio. Join the local media club, appear at men's sports functions perhaps assisting in the press box, and always be sure to talk with the media attending the women's sports events.

Limited budgets are another problem forcing all sports news offices to be fiscally prudent in their publicity campaign. Institutional prerogatives will determine the method of handling men's and women's sports news---whether to combine news releases, combine student staffing, combine sports programs and brochures, etc. However, the women's sports publicist must remember that he or she is often mailing to different media than the men's department, and women's sports brochures are actually designed for a different audience. With the skyrocketing cost of brochures, you may elect to put your dollars into an all-encompassing women's sports program brochure which would service both the coaches and media. Many dollars can be saved by eliminating single sport brochures and the duplication of information concerning the school that they contain. Additional information needed by the media can be distributed through mimeographed fact sheets during the seasons.

The logical approach that the women's sports publicist will use in promoting women's intercollegiate athletics will be determined by 1) identifying the differences in the audiences for men's and women's sports; 2) identifying the

differences in the success levels of the men's and women's sports; 3) Identifying the media needs and attention provided the women's sports; and 4) Identifying the institutional emphasis of the athletic program.

One Last Thing

As a women's sports publicist you must be prepared for the frustration inherent in making a niche for yourself and your relatively new product. Although women have been involved in sports activities for a long time, women's intercollegiate sports have only been in existence for a decade. However, that doesn't mean women athletes are not legitimate sports participants, or that women's athletic events are not valid sports activities.

The women's sports publicist must be prepared to be in the business of changing attitudes in addition to the usual job responsibilities of processing information, recording statistics and records, creating spectator interest and drumming up media support. Women's sports programs no longer have fledgling status, but rather are fully developed programs with qualified staffing and talented athletes. Women's collegiate sports are worthy of media attention and deserving of spectator support. The most successful women's sports publicist is one who can communicate the legitimacy of women's intercollegiate athletics to the media and to the public.